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Texas Child Welfare System Needs to Protect its Workers

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by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2013

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who has agreed to share their story for this report. I could not have written this report without the contributions from former caseworkers Ashley Harris, Tonda Owens, Christine Johnson and Amy Saenz. I hope their stories will not offend anyone, but used to further improve the child welfare system in Texas.

Other interviewees, Madeline McClure, Irene Clemens, Judge Byrne, Angela Ausbrooks, Cathy Cochrahm, Steven McCown, and Christina Wilson all have provided diverse and critical perspectives on the turnover issue.

I also want to acknowledge my CASA internship supervisor, Katherine Kerr, for not only being a great supporter, but also providing much needed resources to make this report happen. You will always be my mentor. I want to thank my report supervisors, Dr. Renita Coleman and Robert Jensen. I truly learned a lot from this experience, and I really had fun working with both of you.

Lastly, I want to thank my parents Young and Kelly Yoo, and my older brother Peter Yoo for their absolute support and encouragement. I truly appreciate your love and patience.

Abstract

Texas Child Welfare System Needs to Protect its Workers

Jean Jihyei Yoo, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

Supervisor: Renita Coleman

Texas Child Protective Services has been struggling with keeping its workers. The turnover rate, which measures the frequency of workers quitting and entering the agency, has been extremely high since the 1980s. In 2012, CPS reported that about one-fourth of its skilled workers are leaving the agency. This puts extra burden on the remaining workers, eventually leading them to resign as well. To fix the turnover issue, the state of Texas initiated a major reform in CPS in 2006. Although the reform succeeded in improving the quality of work environment and other areas, it failed to bring down the turnover rate. To identify why the statewide reform had failed, former caseworkers share their experiences with the agency to reveal what causes the high turnover, the detrimental effects it has on children, and what should be done to reduce the rates.

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Chapter 1: Caseworkers Are Burning Out

Introduction

Ashley Harris remembers her first day at the Child Protective Services when she was told “you won’t be in here very long” by her co-workers. She thought it was odd for someone to say that on her first day. But after few weeks, she realized what they meant; workload and the emotional burden were almost unbearable.

She was hired as an investigative worker in 2006, an entry-level position in the CPS. But it is often regarded as the most rigorous and strenuous position. Investigative workers are usually the first ones to respond to child abuse or neglect reporting. They travel to child’s homes to investigate whether the abuse or neglect had occurred. Then they usually have 24 hours to respond and have 30 days to determine whether the child stays home or goes to foster care.

Julie Moody, CPS region 7 media specialist, explained that the investigators are often put into uncomfortable situations. “They’re walking into someone’s home as an uninvited guest...Often times, people don’t want you in their homes or lives and may not be forthcoming with information,” said Moody.

Harris said her work never ended at the office. “I took a lot of work home,” she said. “I had to drive across Texas at midnight to put a kid somewhere safe because there was no one.” Also, she brought paper works home to make sure she never missed the deadlines. “If you’re not going to turn in your paperwork, you’re going to be reprimanded,” she said.

Soon, Harris realized she was burning out. Her professional life was merging into her personal life and there was no boundary between them. “I gained over 60 pounds over four years,” she said. “My personal life was miserable.”

Harris eventually left the agency after five years. She now works as a child welfare policy advocate at Texas Care for Children.

Another former caseworker, Tonda Owens, was a rare case. Owens thought CPS was the place for her. Owens had dreamed of becoming a child social worker ever since befriending a group of foster youth at her high school track team.

But becoming a CPS worker was not easy; she had applied multiple times but gotten unlucky. “There would be hiring freezes or I wouldn’t get selected,” said Owens. Finally, after several years of repeatedly knocking the agency’s door, she was hired.

Owens was a single mom with an 18-month-old daughter when she started her job at the CPS. But she said she had far more hours at work than with her daughter. “I remember my daughter was in the office when she was a toddler typing up the reports,” she said, recalling the times when she had almost 100 cases in her caseload. “CPS is not a 40-hour job. You never get off at five,” she said.

Owens reluctantly left the agency. “It took me six months to do it and I resigned without even having another job,” she said. This was crucial to her since she was the only source of income in her family. “Even if you’re passionate about [the job], there comes a time where it becomes too much,” she commented about ultimately deciding to leave the agency.

But luckily, she was hired as a Social Services Program Administrator at Palm Square Community Center in Austin. She has been there ever since her departure from the CPS.

Both Harris and Owens decided to share their experience with the Texas CPS to expose the agency’s serious shortcomings. Their experiences of being overworked and unwillingly leaving the workplace are crucial causes of high turnover rates. The agency has been experiencing high volume of workers leaving the agency, which results in a high turnover rate. The turnover rate measures how frequent workers enter and leave their work place. Although turnover occurs across profession, Texas CPS has one of the highest rates of about 25 percent, which is 10 percentage points higher than the national average of 15.2 percent in 2011. It is also higher than the 2011 statewide average, which

is around 16.2 percent. What this means is that one in four skilled CPS caseworkers are leaving and being replaced by inexperienced new-hires.

“Not having turnover is a key to the child welfare system’s success,” said Harris, pointing out the significance of the turnover problem.

While CPS works to improve lives of children, caseworkers also need to be taken care of as well. The staff turnover issue branches out to have detrimental effects on children, the agency and the workers.

How turnover affects caseworkers is simple: remaining caseworkers have to work extra to fill the gap left by the resigned workers. It usually takes about three to six months for new-hires to be fully integrated into units. While hiring and training process is going on, the remaining caseworkers are given extra work and eventually burn out. As Harris mentioned above, workers are unable to take care of themselves physically because of the overwhelming caseloads. But the emotional stress of not being able to keep up with both their work and personal life takes toll on the workers. Ultimately, majority of the remaining caseworkers also choose to leave the agency.

“It’s like the hamster wheel,” Harris said. “The problem keeps coming back.”

The high turnover rate means frequent caseworker changes for children in care. Irene Clemens, the president of Texas Foster Family Association, said she had seen how grave worker changes are to children. “Changes are part of traumatic experience for them,” she said. Clemens said children are often experiencing ‘changes’ either from being removed from home or changing foster care centers. She added that caseworker change is a variable that could be prevented and avoided to alleviate children’s traumatic experience.

The staff turnover also affects the agency by costing them money, workers and reputation. Tex Protects, a nonprofit organization for children, reported in 2008 that losing a worker cost the agency \$15,000 on top of the average worker salary, which is about \$32,000. The extra money was spent to cover the hiring process and training as well as current worker’s overtime work hours. Eventually, the additional cost causes

agency to go into “hiring-freeze,” where it stops hiring new caseworkers. This leads to another problem of staff shortage.

Julie Moody, CPS region 7 media spokesperson, said the agency did experience serious understaffing issue last year. “At one point last year, Travis County had a budget of 94 caseworkers but only had 24 working at the time,” she said. This affects not only the agency but also the remaining 24 workers who are required to fill-in for the 70 resigned workers.

The state recognized the agency’s high turnover rate and decided to act on it. In 2006, the state legislature initiated a comprehensive reform to restructure the agency and fix the turnover problem. The agency benefitted tremendously from the reform; the additional funding enabled the agency to hire additional workers and provide significant upgrade to equipment. More workers led to decrease in caseloads and better equipment meant significant time cuts to drafting casework reports.

Nonetheless the reform still failed to stop workers from leaving the agency. The average turnover rate actually rose immediately after the reform, to 26.4 percent in 2007. The rate remains at 26 percent till today.

But the issue is not likely to be solved any time soon. The agency has been struggling with high turnover rates decades ago and has come up with various solution to address the problem. But none seem to work effectively.

Scott McCown, executive director at Center for Public Policy Priorities, agreed that the turnover issue will not go away soon. “Child Welfare work is hard by nature and is always going to be hard,” he said. “Be realistic. Difficult jobs like this will always experience certain amount of turnover.”

Christine Johnson, a field coordinator at the University of Texas’ School of Social Work, also urges the public to have realistic expectations. She said the workers are put into unimaginable situations that require a lot of courage and strength. But the understaffing issue caused by high turnover rates is affecting the workers. “CPS as a whole is a plan, a service for every child. And that would be possible if fully staffed,” she

said. But Johnson said CPS is trying to work out its problems. “CPS does hell of a job with the resources given.”

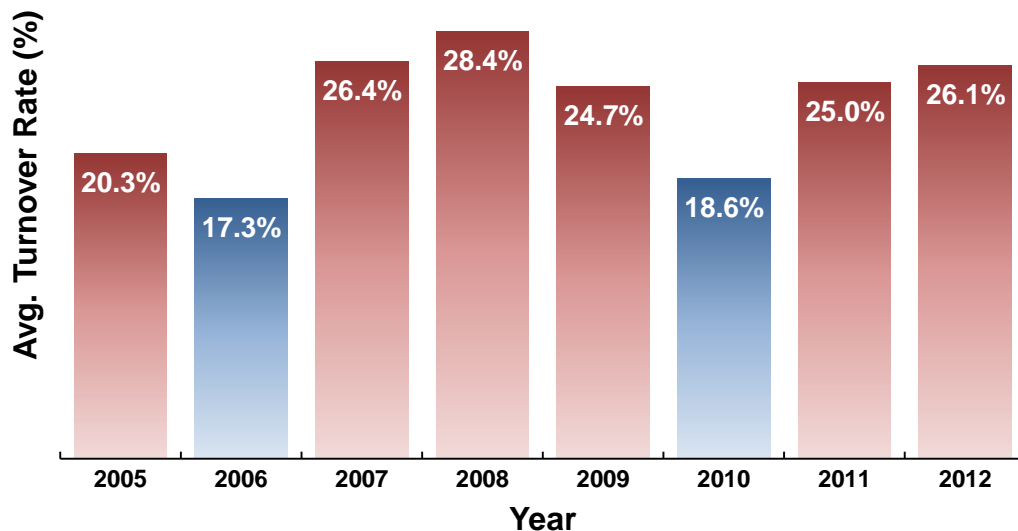


Figure 1: Texas CPS Average Worker Turnover Rates
(Source: Texas Department of Family Protective Services)

Ever since the 1980s, the turnover rates have been around 20 percent. The rates dropped to 17.3 percent after the reform in 2006, but rose sharply to 28.4 percent in 2008. The nationwide economic recession in 2010 caused the rate to decrease, but it increased again to 26.1 percent in 2012.

History of Turnover

The turnover rate exists in almost all professions. The national average turnover rate reported by Compdata, a private survey data provider for employers, was 15.2 percent in 2011, which was slightly higher than 14.4 percent from previous year. But the average employee turnover rate for Texas CPS easily exceeds the national average by 10 percentage points with 25 percent in 2011.

Ever since the 1980s, the turnover rate at CPS had been increasing steadily. Johnson, field coordinator at the University of Texas’ School of Social Work, said she

has witnessed the steady increase in staff turnover ever since she was a caseworker 20 years ago.

“Worker retention, or turnover has been a long-standing issue,” said Harris.

The rate peaked to 30 percent in the early 2000s, prompting the agency and the state to act to bring the rates down. A huge reform took place within the agency in 2006, and according to the CPS annual report, the rate dropped to 17 percent the year after. But the report also noted that the rate soared to 26 percent the following year.

More recently, the Texas Department of Family Protective Services reported that the 2012 statewide turnover average was 26.1 percent. But the majority of the regions had turnover rates that were much higher. The Texas CPS reported in 2012 that each 11 service regions had different turnover rates, and five of them had rates higher than 30 percent. That means one-third of the workers are leaving and being replaced.

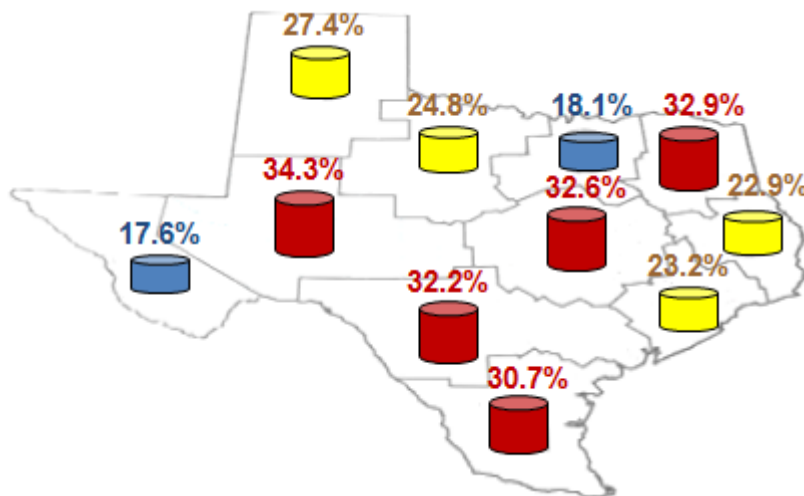


Figure 2: Texas CPS Regional Turnover Rates

(Source: Texas Department of Family Protective Services)

The turnover rates also differ among worker units. The agency has four types of caseworker units – Investigative, conservative, family based social services (FBSS) and kinship. According to the report by the Center for Public Policy Priorities, investigative unit has the highest turnover rate. From 2006 to 2008, the rate for investigative workers

reached 33 percent, which exceeds the state average of 17.3 percent in 2006 and 28.4 percent in 2008.

CPS Faces Major Understaffing

A conspicuous result of the turnover is worker shortage. In 2012, Texas CPS has experienced a major understaffing issue. The agency reported that the number of caseworkers leaving the agency is higher than the number of new-hires. Last August, the agency hired 65 investigators but had 73 leave the agency the same month. Then in October, there were 1,495 caseworkers in the state, 400 less than what the agency should have.

Moody, region 7 media specialist at CPS, said her region, which includes Travis County, were short of 70 caseworkers last year. “At one point last year, Travis County had a budget of 94 caseworkers but only had 24 working at the time.”

The understaffing issue caught media’s attention as well. Both *The American Statesman* and *The Dallas Morning News* reported in 2012 that CPS is facing a serious surge in open cases that are 60 days or older. By law, caseworkers are required to contact the reported children and family within 24 hours and close the case within 30 days. “Last year, there were more than 2,800 delinquent cases in Travis county alone,” said Moody. The agency had to bring in workers from Dallas and Houston to speed the process.

But she said the agency is slowly improving. “In the last 12 months, the agency has really stepped up efforts to combat the turnover rate,” she said. The number of new hires is increasing and new policies are implemented such as “master investigators” who are special group of ex-law enforcement workers aimed to help high-profile, urgent cases. But whether adding new workers will solve the understaffing and turnover issue is uncertain.

“We don’t have trouble actually hiring people,” Moody said. “It’s keeping them; that’s the challenge.”

Children are in Danger

Another palpable reason for paying attention to the worker turnover issue is that children are in danger. The child population in Texas has been increasing and as a result, reported cases of child abuse and neglect are also on the rise. Between 2005 and 2012, Texas added one million children to its population. As a result, the number of abuse and neglect cases also increased. According to the CPS annual report, the number of confirmed investigation grew from 91,000 cases 97,000 between 2005 and 2012. But since the agency is going through major understaffing issue, the increase in abuse and neglect cases becomes a serious concern.

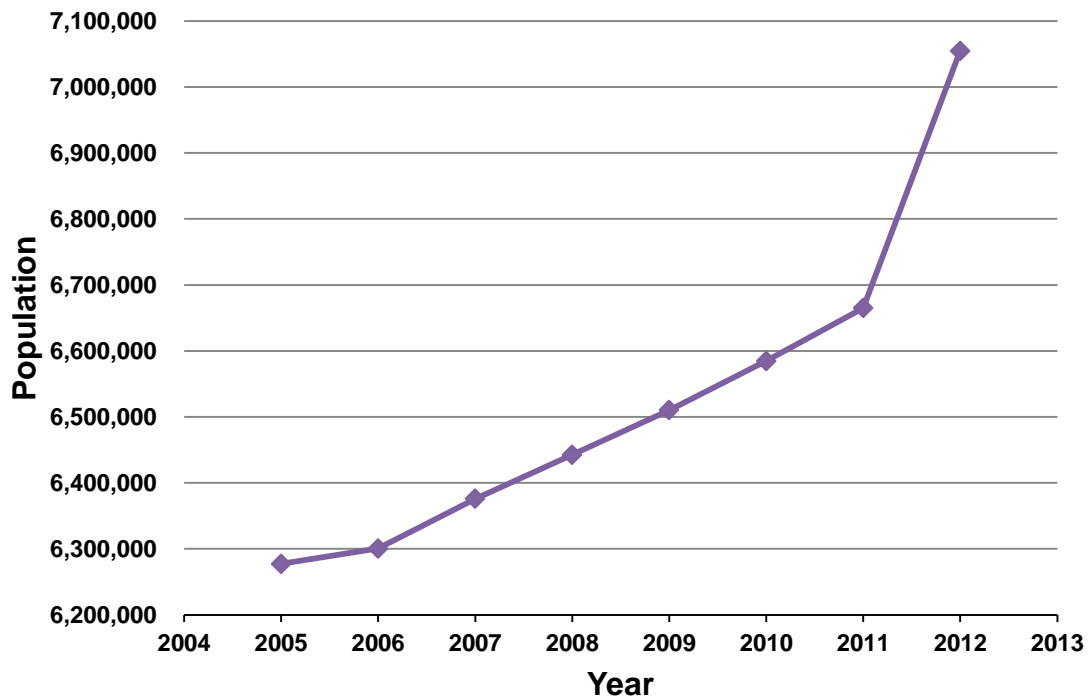


Figure 3: Texas Child population
(Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

It seems reasonable that more workers are needed to meet the increasing children population and reported cases. But the opposite is happening; the agency is understaffed.

Fewer caseworkers mean delayed response to cases, which can lead to detrimental consequences such as serious injury or even death of a child.

“Children see caseworkers as their lifeline,” said Clemens, president of Texas Foster Family Association. She said her experience as a foster parent made her realize the significance of worker-child relationship.

Clemens explained that every time a new worker is assigned, he or she requires additional time to catch up with the progress of each case. But she says there is no time because federal laws give children and the agency only 12 to 18 months to close cases.

A case is generated when an investigative caseworker validates that there has been an abuse or neglect of the child. Then the case goes before a judge for removal, in which case, the agency has 12 months to figure out what will happen to the child. There are two available outcomes: the child is reunited with the biological family or is up for adoption. During the whole process, the child stays in foster care or with a relative.

Darlene Byrne, judicial district judge at Travis County Courthouse, said the turnover “delays the process that’s incredibly urgent.” She added that the children are put through unnecessary life changes, from sleeping at different homes to transferring schools. Byrne said worker changes are something that is preventable by the agency and could help the already traumatized children.

Clemens also addressed the trust issue with children. “When they [children] come into care, they don’t trust people very much,” said Clemens. “It’s part of our job to earn that trust.”

Harris explained that building a strong rapport with the children and their biological family is important.

“To give the right services, you have to know the families from a personal level,” she said. But she said it takes a lot of time and is often subject to chaos.

An advocacy group working closely with children also was concerned about new workers not being able to adequately meet the needs of each child. Cathy Cockhram, training supervisor at Texas CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), a nonprofit

organization for volunteers to represent abused and neglected children in courts, said frequent worker changes often result in the loss of child's history, contact with family and the dynamic to meet the needs of each case. But in order to make the best decision – child reunites with the family or goes for adoption – caseworkers need to understand the true needs of each child. She adds “There's no opportunity to build trust and relationship,” since workers are running out of time to close their own and new cases.

Child Welfare League of America, the oldest child welfare organization in the country, also included in their 2010 report that “the more time a caseworker spends with the child and family, the better the outcomes for those children and families.”

Johnson agreed on the significance of the relationship between caseworkers and children. “When you're thrown in with a stranger, there will be trust issues with children,” she said. “The goal of CPS is getting kids out of foster care, but they end up being stuck.”

Workers are Dissatisfied

While it is obvious that children are at risk when there is a worker change, not many are noticing how it is detrimentally affecting the lives of caseworkers as well. Basically, caseworkers are physically and emotionally “burnt out” from various reasons. “Lots of CPS workers don't take care of themselves,” said Harris, who confided that she gained 60 pounds over four years working at CPS.

But she says physical problem is not the only concern she has for the workers; there is a greater issue with emotional stress.

“I'm making a life and death decisions for a child, and sometimes the decision I make wakes me up at night,” she said. “I worry if I made the wrong decision.”

Most workers enter the agency with the intention of doing a good job. But they are unable to do so because of overwhelming caseload. Moreover, majority of the new-hires are fresh out of college, meaning they had had very little or no previous professional experience.

Amy Saenz, another previous CPS caseworker also attested to the “burnt out” phenomenon. She worked as a conservatorship caseworker. The position required her to visit children’s homes and driving them to therapy sessions. Although she was never regarded as the “intruder” as most investigators did, she still struggled with being underpaid, working long hours and dealing with heavy caseloads.

As a conservative worker, she was required to meet with children at least once every month. Also, because she worked in rural area, she had to oversee five counties. “We were often assigned to kid who lived three hours away,” Saenz said. “I could’ve easily spent 15 hours on the road every day.”

She said her time on the road was in addition to completing other duties such as appearing at court hearings, providing family services and filing reports.

While working at the agency, Saenz gave a birth to a daughter and became a single mom. But instead of spending time with her daughter, Saenz had spent far more time driving around and visiting children.

“I was missing my child’s life to save other children’s lives,” said Saenz.

In addition to her disintegrating personal life, she saw the number of caseworkers leaving the agency was increasing. “At one point, my region went down from six conservatorship workers to two,” she said. This affected critically to worker performance. “There was endless inconsistency in case management,” she said. “Changes in worker continuity definitely affected how we performance.”

Reasons for quitting

There have been numerous studies identifying why caseworkers are leaving the agency. TexProtects, an association for the protection of children, had released a report in 2008 addressing prominent reasons for why the turnover rate was so high for Texas CPS. The listed reasons were high caseloads, inadequate pay, supervision quality, inadequate training and tough working conditions, lack of job appreciation, overwhelming paperwork demands, and chronic emotional stress. The listed complaints were gathered from worker exit interviews conducted by the CPS.

But former caseworkers and advocacy groups are saying there are few other lesser-known issues that are as critical as the well-known ones. They are suggesting that the hiring system and the agency's culture may be the ones to blame for high worker turnover.

Madeline McClure, executive director at TexProtects, said the agency is hiring the "wrong applicants" which leads to lower worker retention and high turnover rates. She explained that the current hiring system lets applicants choose the position they wish to apply for: investigative, conservatorship, Family Based Social Services, or kinship care. Then selected applicants all receive basic training and specialized training for 6 months each. The total training process takes about three months. But the problem is that most people are not sure which position best suits them.

McClure said most applicants are drawn to investigative unit because of the \$5,000 pay bonus instituted in 2006. The bonus is given to new investigative caseworkers aiming to attract more qualified applicants and bring down the high turnover rate within the unit. According to the agency, the investigative unit had consistently high turnover rate around 30 percent. Although the new incentive policy succeeded bringing more workers, it had failed to bring down the turnover rate.

"Certain people are cut out for investigative casework or social services," McClure said. "But on paper, the roles don't seem that different and department doesn't allow you to switch up for an entire year."

She suggested that the agency select applicants first then assign positions after they complete basic training. That way, the applicants can be matched with positions that are most suitable for them based on their skill sets and personality.

Byrne, the Travis County Court Judge, also agreed with McClure's suggestions. "Most applicants don't even know what they're good at," she said. "Have them go through training assessing what skills their skills are then place them in the units where they can flourish."

Ironically, the investigative unit suffers the most from the inefficient hiring system. Although the unit attracts and hires the most applicants, it has the least retention rates. Moody, CPS regional spokesperson, said the worker shortage occurs mostly in the investigative unit. In 2011, CPS had budget for 93 investigators but only had 40 working for the year and in 2012, only 24 workers. The situation has not improved much as the agency had 61 investigators working at the start of 2013 with 23 workers in training. That's still 10 workers fewer than the agency's quota of 93 investigators.

Byrne suggested rewarding workers for their achievements may work better than offering incentives at the beginning as the agency did with the newly-hired investigators. "Reward longevity," she said. "We do it on the front end, and it's less effective."

Currently, the only reward for staying at CPS is promotion and pay raise. But the average salary for supervisor has been consistent, even decreasing slightly from \$40,000 in 2006 to \$38,000 in 2012. Also, the average salary for caseworkers is around \$36,000 for investigator and \$31,000 for non-investigators, which is much lower than the \$37,000 reported by the Child Welfare League of America.

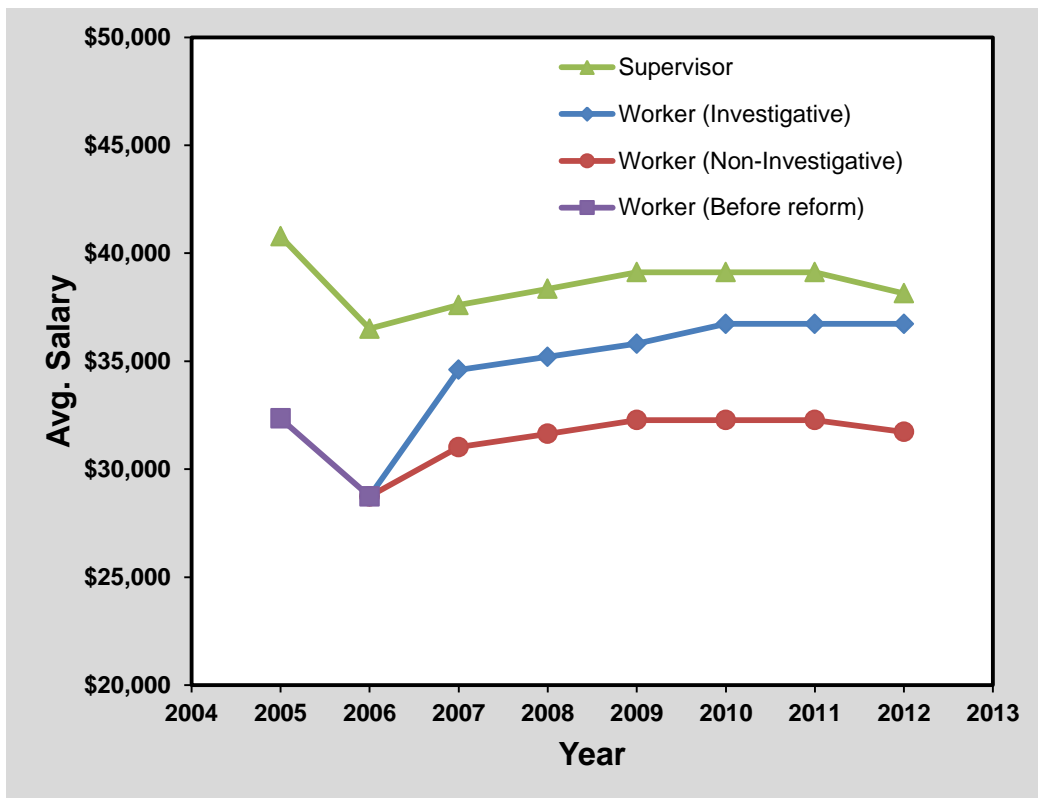


Figure 4: Texas CPS Average Salary for Caseworkers
(Source: Texas Department of Family Protective Services)

Before the reform, the average salary for all caseworkers was around \$32,000. Then the reform occurred and the average salary differed between investigative unit and non-investigative units (Family Based Safety Services, Conservative, and Kinship). The average salary for investigative unit is \$5,000 more than other units because of the hiring-bonus implemented with the reform. However, the even with the \$5,000 bonus, the average salary for caseworkers is much lower than the national average, which is \$40,000 for social workers reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The average salary for supervisors has not changed much. It went down significantly in 2006 from \$40,000 in previous year to \$36,000. Then it went up again slightly to \$39,000 but fell down to \$38,000 in 2012. Unlike caseworkers, supervisors have not benefitted much from the reform salary-wise.

Another issue addressed by former CPS workers deals with the agency's work environment and how the culture inside the agency has changed over the years. Johnson said the culture inside has "gotten more and more rigid" and "less flexible." She has

worked at the agency 20 years ago and now coordinates social work students who wish to become caseworkers at the University of Texas.

When asked about the changing attitude with supervisors, Moody said this was “an impossible question to answer” because she is unable to fully understand the situations of the “former” caseworkers or can speak “on behalf of unknown ‘supervisor’s attitudes’.” But she said delayed responses to reporting can cause serious harm to children and that may explain the stricter policy within the agency.

Harris, a former caseworker, also addressed the “cultural attitude” as the key issue. She said the CPS state office had the opposite problem of turnover; the leadership retention rate was too high. “How can you expect improvement when there’s no leadership change?” she asked.

She also said that people tend to forget what happens on the ground-level when they are away from the field. So the state-office leadership, which is comprised of former caseworkers from 20 to 30 years ago, may not be best at understanding the hardships of current workers and making systematic improvements.

Owens, former CPS worker, said the agency had become increasingly “top-heavy” and people in the state-level office were given too much power. The top-heavy system refers to the concentration of authority in the higher-level office or position. “That’s [state-office] where all the fun’s allocated and it’s a problem,” she said, which meant that the state-office was handling all the policy changes and implementations.

The example Owens gave was the removal policy. She said the state office pushed for removal in most confirmed cases and approved for sending the children to foster care. “I don’t believe every situation should be a removal. I believe you should do everything possible to keep the child with the family,” she said.

But Moody said caseworkers are allowed to make suggestions or complaints to the higher offices. She explained that CPS caseworkers are under the Texas Health and Human Services umbrella, and according to the department’s human resources manual, “an employee is encourage to make an effort to resolve issues(s) or concerns(s)

informally with his or her supervisor or the next higher-level supervisor in the chain of command before filing an administrative complaint.” She also said it is hard to determine how much authority caseworkers can have on the cases because “every case is different.”

Another leadership issue within the agency is with inexperienced supervisors. Johnson, who had been at the agency during the 1980s when the staff turnover rate was relatively low, said that the role of a supervisor was crucial in worker retention. “I once had 70 kids on my caseload,” said Johnson. But she remained with the agency for more than 10 years because of the “encouraging and supportive” supervisors. She said supervisors back then understood that she sometimes “can’t do it all.” But now, Johnson said the caseworkers are more likely to be “written-up” and be punished for unfinished works.

Harris also said the relationship between caseworkers and supervisors was significant in worker retention.

“The reason I stayed long was because of my supervisor at the time,” she said. “She stepped up and I could vent out my emotional stress.”

But she said she saw changes in supervisor’s attitude towards their caseworkers. She said supervisors stopped asking “How can I help you” when they saw workers having problems.

“Why weren’t you able to do this is never the question anymore.”

Johnson said this was because the changes in the culture and politics within CPS. She said the agency now requires supervisors to be assertive and less tolerant. Also, the high turnover causes younger and inexperienced workers to be promoted as supervisors. Johnson said her supervisor at the time had been at the agency for at least 10 years. But now, there are supervisors who had been with the agency for less than five years. This is one of the side-effects of turnover; more skilled caseworkers are leaving, which means there are fewer qualified candidates for supervisor position.

What happens when workers quit?

Both the agency and workers refer to turnover as a ‘vicious cycle. “People quit, then workers get enormous amount of caseload while the expectations stay the same,” said Johnson. “Then those workers quit.”

Moody, spokesperson for region 7 CPS explains that when a caseworker leaves the agency, the cases on his or her caseload will be transferred to other members of the unit. She added that caseworkers had to travel around several parts of the state to help out with the understaffed regional CPS offices last year.

The agency also is burdened by the turnover; the hiring system takes time and required unnecessary spending. As addressed before, the agency has to spend extra \$15,000 to cover for the hiring process and training. “When an employee gives notice, until the time when a new worker can take their place takes months,” explains Moody. “There’s about six months training time for CPS caseworkers not to mention the time it takes to hire someone.”

But while the agency is struggling to fill the gap, caseworkers are working overtime to meet the deadline for their new cases. The overworked caseworkers are eventually “burnt out,” unable to keep up with daily duties.

Moody said the worker shortage occurs mostly with investigators. In 2011, CPS had budget for 93 investigators but only had 40 working for the year and in 2012, only 24 workers. The situation has not improved much as the agency had 61 investigators working at the start of 2013 with 23 workers in training. But it is still 10 short of the agency’s quota of 93 investigators.

“They are walking into someone’s home as an uninvited guest and must make a lot of decisions by observing and listening closely. Often times, people don’t want you in their homes or lives and may not be forthcoming with information,” said Moody.

Chapter 2: 2006 CPS Reform and Current Efforts

The History of 2006 Reform

One of the major efforts to overturn the turnover issue was through a statewide CPS reform. In 2004, Texas had the highest number of child deaths. The Texas Department of Family Protective Services reported that 1,220 children died from abuse and neglect that year, and half of those children were in contact with the CPS caseworkers.

After being criticized by the media and public, Texas legislature urged CPS to reevaluate their system and conduct studies to improve the agency. The study found out that the caseworkers are exhausted and unable to adequately handle their cases. In response, the legislature initiated a statewide reform in CPS.

The reform began with the passing of Senate Bill 6 in 2006. The bill focused primarily on addressing the disproportionality issue and increase diversity among CPS workers and improving the agency structure to ease the burden of caseworkers. In addition, the bill also required CPS to hire investigative workers with forensic experience and establish partnership with state law enforcement agencies. This aimed to reduce the abnormally high turnover rate within the investigative unit.

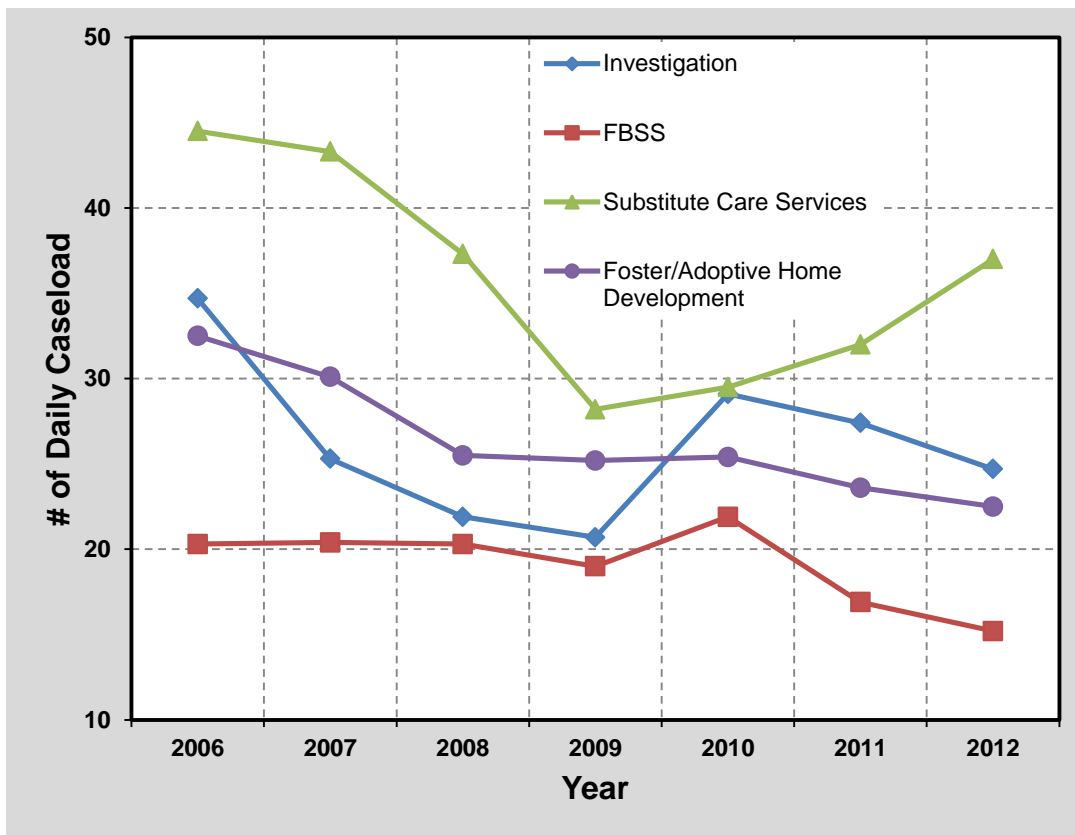


Figure 5: Number of Daily Caseload
(Source: Texas Department of Family Protective Services)

The number of cases for workers dropped significantly for most units after reform. One significant benefit from the reform was the 2,500 additional workers, which helped significantly in bringing down the caseloads for caseworkers.

As for funding, the state invested \$248 million in CPS in 2005. The funding allowed to agency to hire 2,500 additional caseworkers and bring in new technology to assist workers do their job. As a result, the caseloads fell from 47 in 2005 to 25 in 2007, a 40 percent decline.

The internal structure also went through changes. The reform created four separate units (investigative, Family Based Safety Service (FBSS), conservatorship and kinship) to effectively address the needs of children removed. Before the transformation, CPS had workers working on each case until it closed. This becomes a serious burden when there is already an explosion in the caseloads.

The effort to improve the system continued through 2007 when the state legislature passed another bill, Senate Bill 758. The bill addressed the need for reducing caseloads so the caseworkers can visit children and their families more often. As a result, more children were kept at home with their family instead of being placed at foster care.

The agency hired more conservatorship and FBSS caseworkers to strengthen the family-based services. From 2007 to 2009, about 200 additional caseworkers were added to FBSS unit and 400 for conservatorship unit. This helped the caseload to drop from 43 in 2007 to 28 in 2009, which was a 35 percent decline.

The CPS reform was effective in many ways. It helped bring down the caseloads, attract more qualified applicants and improve work environment. But it failed to reduce the number of workers leaving the agency.

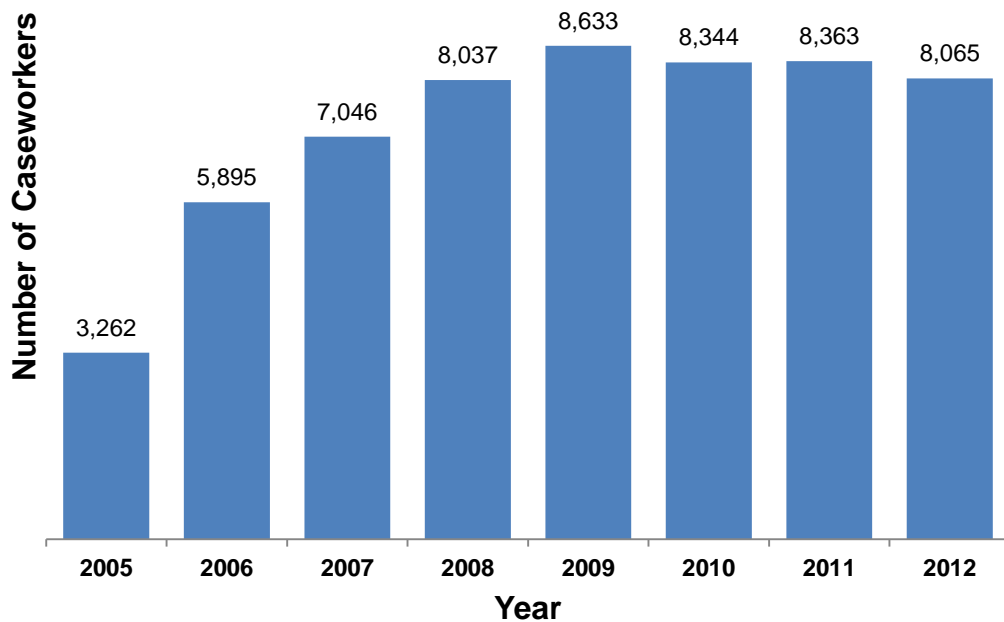


Figure 6: Number of caseworkers
(Source: Texas Department of Family Protective Services)

The number of caseworkers jumped from around 3,000 in 2006 to 8,000 in 2008. The agency hired additional workers after the comprehensive reform took place in 2006. The reform divided workers into four units each assigned to specific tasks. Additional workers were hired to strengthen each unit.

Reform Fails to Reduce High Turnover Rate

The turnover rate in peaked to 40 percent in 2003, which prompted the reform. The rate dropped to 29.4 percent in 2005 then to 17.3 percent in 2006. But it quickly rose to 26.4 percent in 2007 then has remained around 25 percent ever since.

Harris, a former CPS worker who worked at the agency in 2005, said the reform was like a “Band-Aid,” providing solution only temporarily.

“The reform didn’t fix the cracks because it didn’t ask the right question,” she said.

The salary increase and \$5,000 bonus implemented during the reform was an ambitious way to attract better and more workers. But the number of workers leaving was also increasing.

Harris said the \$5,000 bonus for new investigative workers didn’t work because it failed to attract the right type of workers. “We should question “What kind of workers will it attract?” and “Are they passionate?” she said.

Madeline McClure, executive director at Tex Protects, agrees with Harris that \$5,000 incentive isn’t going to do the trick.

“Applicants naturally biased towards investigative position despite their personality and kills,” she said.

The reform’s achievement in reducing caseloads also failed to bring down the turnover rate. Resigned caseworkers said high caseload was one of the main reasons why they chose to leave the agency. The number of cases has been decreasing over the years; in 2005, the average number of cases was 33, but it went down to 26 in 2007 then to 24 in 2012.

But Tonda Owens, former caseworker, said the reported caseload is not very accurate. She said workers are accepting new cases without closing the old ones just to avoid falling behind. This way, workers can avoid being written up. “It becomes numbers game. It may look good on the papers but it’s not effective,” Owens said.

Harris also pointed out that the reported cases do not reflect the real workload. Cases only represent the number of children. But in reality, caseworkers have to deal with parents, attorneys, service providers, foster care, and many more. “It’s all about numbers,” she said, agreeing with Owens.

The CPS also had trouble with unnecessary expenditure. The total CPS staff expenditure reported by the Department of Family and Protective Services increased dramatically from \$300 million to \$400 million in two years from 2006 to 2008.

Tex Protects reported in 2008 that CPS ends up spending about \$52,000 on each worker because of the frequent worker changes. The turnover costs, which refers to money spent on hiring new workers, includes overtime costs for remaining workers covering the vacancy, advertising and placement costs, interviewing and background check costs, and the six-month training.

In 2006, the agency lost about 1,077 workers including both the caseworkers and supervisors. The agency originally spent about \$37 million dollars hiring them. But when they resigned, the agency had to spend additional \$56 million to fill the vacancy.

The unnecessary cost of replacement quickly depletes the agency’s annual funding. This causes hiring freeze and understaffing, which puts burden on the remaining caseworkers. Ultimately, workers are burnt out and they too leave the agency.

What Should CPS Do?

CPS is hitting a brick wall with the high turnover rates. Numerous studies identified why caseworkers are leaving the agency. Then the state initiated a major reform which did bring about changes but still failed to bring down the turnover rates. Then what should be done?

Angela Ausbrooks, assistant professor at Texas State University said studying the reasons why caseworkers stay may be an effective approach to reduce turnover rates. Ausbrooks also was a CPS caseworker few years ago. But she didn't leave because she was burnt out or she didn't agree with the policies. What led her to leave was to study why people stayed at the agency.

She said the best solution to retain workers is focusing on strength perspective.

"Really rewarding people who are staying and doing their job could impact caseworkers to remain with the agency," said Ausbrooks.

She then asked, "what's the point of giving incentives or increasing salary for new people?" and suggested that impacting their willingness to stay could critically help agency's future.

Ausbrooks' research found that the majority of workers who stay at the agency for more than 10 years had personal mission, whether it was saving lives or helping others. She said selecting applicants who have those personal missions and helping them tap into them while working at the agency may help tremendously with the retention and turnover rates.

But Ausbrooks concluded that "any effort could be helpful if they're willing to address it."

Child Welfare System: Texas vs. Other States

The staff turnover problem is not only visible in Texas. "Most states such as California or New York, also struggle with the same case turnover dynamics," said Cockhram, a training supervisor at Texas CASA. But she said the problem is acute in Texas and the agency needs to put in more effort.

According to the Foundation for Government Accountability's report on the overall rankings of U.S. child welfare agencies, Texas CPS placed 32 out of 51 programs in 2012. What is worse is that Texas ranked even lower when evaluated by how the welfare agency can provide stable environment for children. Texas CPS ranked in 40.

When asked where Texas CPS stands compare to other states, Christian Wilson, a staff attorney for Children's Rights, said the state is performing "poorly" on the federal benchmark. Children's Rights is a national watchdog organization for child welfare service across the country.

Wilson said Texas CPS failed to meet the national average of providing stability for children in care for 24 months in 2010. About 79 percent of children in care in Texas had two or more placement changes, which was lot higher than the national average of 66.1 percent.

Current Efforts

Although the turnover issue is unlikely to be solved anytime soon, the state and the agency are working to improve the situation.

There are about several dozen bills filed related to child welfare this legislature. And recently, the Texas DFPS presented to the Senate Finance Committee reporting of CPS's recent achievements and the ways to improve the agency.

The report included that the agency had more skilled and tenured caseworkers and reduced the number of delinquent cases. But they also reported that there is a rapid child population growth in the state which will lead to more cases of abuse and neglect. The agency asked for more funding for next year to cope with the anticipated increase in reports while maintaining the number of cases for each worker. The increased funding will also raise caseworker and supervisor salaries, improve training system and further reduce caseloads and delinquent cases.

"Funding is important, but non-funding issues are as equally as important," said McClure from Tex Protects. She said there are ways to keep the workers by giving adequate support and creating a culture respecting the workers.

Clemens, from Foster Family Association, said positive change is coming, which refers to the newly appointed DFPS Commissioner John Specia. According to the

Department's statement, Specia is a senior district judge who has "extensive experience in policy issues involving children and families." Clemens said she has high expectations for Specia, who has heard thousands of CPS cases over the years. "I have a lot of hope for significant changes, some through legislation, but more from who he is and what he expects with the agency," she said.

But Stephen McCown, executive director at Center for Public Policy Priorities, said more money might be the solution.

"One thing people say in exit interview is that they left because the job was so difficult. But that's scientifically dubious conclusion," he said. "Even it's an extremely dangerous job, I'm going to do it if you're going to pay me a fortune."

But realistically, he said that work by nature is difficult and the agency will always experience significant turnovers.

Johnson also urged for realistic understanding for the caseworkers. The media has been constantly scrutinizing CPS workers for every child death that occurs in the state. But it's not feasible for workers to keep up with every child and prevent every death that happens especially with high worker turnover rates.

This is unfortunate for new caseworkers who enter with certain expectations. Johnson, who works closely with social work students at the University of Texas, said "students come in with great intensions." Johnson added that most have personal mission wanting to help people and work with children and family.

Owens, a former caseworker who hoped that she would retire at CPS, is now unsure if she would ever go back to the agency. Her colleagues who are at the agency had told her that the agency is likely will implement another changes. Owens said she is not surprised.

"They do this [changes] every few years, so I'm not impressed with that," she said.

Owens also said her friends still contact her about various open positions in CPS. "I'd always get calls or emails about applying for different things in CPS or about going

back to CPS.” Although Owens appreciates people’s efforts, she is unsure if the agency is ready for her yet.

“At this level, I would have to go back as a program director or I would have to go to state office where I could be in a position to make real, effective policy changes,” she said. “Because I know that’s what needs to happen.”

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